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Source: *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 1980), pp. 235-246
Published by: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20847147
Accessed: 17/06/2014 23:07

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ISLAM: LEGACY AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Fazlur Rahman

Islam arose in the early seventh century Mecca as a response to certain spiritual-moral and social problems, primarily to polytheism and a grave socio-economic disparity that prevailed in the prosperous mercantile community of Mecca. There is strong evidence in the Qur'ān itself that, in its eyes, the two, monotheism and humanitarianism - i.e., human egalitarianism - were organically linked from the very beginning. The Qur'ān asked Meccans to "recognize the right of the poor" in their wealth and to be grateful to the one God who had "satiated them from hunger and given them immunity from war," thus underlining peace and prosperity as the greatest blessing of God. When the Meccan merchants rejected the Prophet's call, saying that he had neither the right to interfere in their faith nor in their wealth because "nobody can tell us what to do with our wealth," a thirteen year long and protracted struggle followed after which Muḥammad (peace be on him) moved from Mecca to Madina.

In Madina, the holy Prophet was able to put through the reforms for which he had lacked the necessary political power in Mecca. The Zakat-tax was imposed on the relatively well-to-do to create a welfare state; usury was prohibited and instead, investment in the uplift of the poor sectors of society was constantly stressed and characterized as "establishing credit with God" as opposed to investments in usurious institutions. The rights of slaves, women, orphans, captives, wayfarers, etc, were emphasized and, in general, sustained and massive effort was made to improve the lot of and strengthen the weaker segment of society. Justice in economic matters, fair-play in political affairs and kindness in social relations were constantly upheld as the true ideal of piety; forgiveness "to those who have been transgressing against you" was declared to be the mark of true faith. Familial relations were to be based on mutual "love and mercy", the

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husband and the wife were called "garments unto one another" and husbands were, for example, prohibited to take back any gifts from their wives in case of divorce "even if you may have gifted them a heap of gold." The age-old Arab institution of vengeance (*tha'r*) was abolished, divisions into tribes and nations, tongues and colours serve certain useful functions, including variety and richness of the human race, provided they do not tend to produce any essential distinction between man and man in terms of superiority or inferiority.

Wherever the Qur'ān and Muḥammad (peace be on him) could bring reform through legislation, this was done; otherwise, issues were clarified at the ethical plane and "clear guidance" was provided in the direction in which human society ought to move. Thus, in the almost parallel cases of slavery and polygamy, these were legally restrictively permitted, but the direction of the abolition of both was made quite clear. In both cases, however, historical forces did not allow their abolition and, in particular, the rapid and vast Muslim conquest soon after the holy Propnet's death, which immediately resulted in massive increase in the number of slaves and slave women, represented developments that in their effects, ran counter to the socio-moral purposes of the Qur'ān on these issues.

What is extremely important to note is that the Qur'ān and Muḥammad's practice had provided two basic factors whose constant interaction is ideally the source of all Islamic dynamism. One is the moral-spiritual factor, the values of the Qur'ān, under whose impact the individual Muslim is to be reformed and trained as one who "surrenders himself to God". This factor, without which a Muslim is unthinkable, is denoted in the Qur'ān by the key term *taqwā*. *Taqwā* means that *state of mind whereby a person becomes capable of discerning right from wrong* (one might call it "conscience") *and acts choosing the right with the full awareness that the ultimate criterion of judgment upon his perception and action lies outside him.* The second part of this statement is absolutely important since the Qur'ān recurrently emphasizes and warns against the subjectivity of human perceptions, wether this subjectivity has its source in conditions that are individual, national, racial-cultural or indeed, communal: "(The truth) is not your (i.e., Muslim's) wishful thinking, nor is it the wishful thinking of the people of the Book (i.e., Jews and Christians)." (IV, 123) The human self-

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deception is of such an order that "when it is said to them 'do not sow corruption on the earth', they reply 'we are only reforming (the earth)', beware! these are the corruptors but they do not realize this" (II, 11). Hence *taqwā* and self-deception are finally incompatible.

The Qur'ānic accounts of the Last Day or the End are an amplification of the themes of *taqwā*. If one develops real *taqwā* or conscience within oneself, one must keep one's gaze at the long range purposes or ends of life and one cannot allow oneself to get lost in the immediate, short-term expediencies, for these latter make man myopic and blind to the real ends. This is the meaning of the end or the *ākhira* as opposed to the short-sighted and vagrant views of life called the *dunyā*. Again, in the End-Judgment, man's inmost thoughts and intentions will become public and the Qur'ān says that a person's own "ears, eyes and skins will bear witness against him." (XLI, 22) It is the hour of truth when man will be faced with a candid stock-taking of his deeds. But *taqwā* requires that man have this experience constantly in this life; he must face the truth, do his stock-taking and conduct himelf accordingly.

Islam wants to build an individual with this kind of sense of responsibility. Myopic individuals totally immersed in the immediate pleasures and insatiable appetite for consumer goods are hardly the stuff through which a higher and healthy life can be fashioned and a better world built for the future generations. Here we will be told that this is too utopian and unattainable a goal to seek to create a whole society like this and that at best you can expect to have only a very small minority comprising individuals of this type. The true reply to this criticism is that we are talking about goals not about what may be actually attained at any given time. If a society should set its very goals at no better than the creation of a plastic world of consumer goods, rather than the well-being of man as a whole, and then boast that there is no gap between its ideals and its actualities, one can only say that its estimation of man and of consumer goods is also identical. Just as there has to be a positive and intelligible link between the ideal and the real to make the forward movement of the real possible, it is equally imperative for such a movement that the ideal be something higher.

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Otherwise, conscience becomes dull and the actual stagnates to a point where even interests degenerate either into group interests or purely individual selfishness.

This, then, is the account of true conscience without the cultivation of which at least to some adequate degree no individual can be prepared to serve a higher or "more ultimate" end. The second aspect which is equally a *sine qua non* for the Qur'ān in achieving its goals is that of the "community that surrenders itself to God (*Umma Muslima*)", a concept whose origin the Qur'ān attributes to Abraham. This is a community the constitution of whose individuals we have delineated just now. When, after a protracted criticism of earlier communities for their divisiveness of mankind through their proprietary claims over truth, the Qur'ān announces the formation of an actual historic Muslim community it calls it "the median community," "The best community that has been provided for mankind, for you command the good and prohibit evil and you believe in God" (III, 110). But it also clearly told Muslims that they cannot take God for granted, that God is not the prisoner of their wishful thinking, and, indeed, that if Muslims would not come up to God's purposes, He is capable of raising other people "who will not be like you. (LIII, 38), for God gives the "inheritance of the earth to those who will deserve it (XXI, 105).

Just as God passes judgement upon individuals, indeed, so does He judge peoples, nations and communities in history. This judgement is according to well established laws called the "practice of God which is unchangeable." The mandate of man, being God's vice-gerent on earth is that he remove "corruption" from the earth and reform its affairs in such a way that God's law shall work. When a nation or community has been given power on the earth but it misuses that power, does not stop the rot but eventually itself becomes rotten, it "becomes ripe for the judgement" and is removed from the scene so that "neither the heavens nor the earth weep for it." (LVI 29) And the Qur'ān almost invariably adds, "We did them no injustice, they did injustice to themselves." It is for this purpose i.e. in order to discover why nations rise and fall that the Qur'ān asks people "to travel on the earth and "see how the criminal (nations) fell" and "to develop eyes that can see, ears that can hear and hearts that can understand" (XXII, 46 and elsewhere).

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In sum, then, individual conscience Iman and Ikhlas and the collective will to act, i.e., *taqwā* and the community, Umma are the twin pillars upon which according to guidaner given in the Holy Qur'ān and Sunna edifice of Islam rests. So long as the two remain strong and mutually supportive and alive, the whole edifice will work, but should one weaken or should the bond between the two be severed or dislocated, the end will be tragic.

We have already noted how on the issues of slavery and polygamy, the orientation of the Qur'ān was distorted and, in fact, reversed through the early Muslims conquests. We have also pointed out elswehere* that an Islamic ethics proper, systematically based upon a genuine understanding of the purposes of the Qur'ān, did not develop in later Muslim history. The leaders of the Sharia made practically no distinction between ethics and law, as hinted above. If, first, an ethics of the Qur'ān had been systematically constructed and then law derived from it with due regard to the changing social situations, Islamic conscience could have been kept more or less fully alive and the emerging phenomenon of Sufism could have been directed into more healthy and constructive channels. But in the absence of a truly Qur'ānic ethics, the spirit of Islam was stormed by an unbridled growth of some wild forms of spirituality ranging from extravagant esoteric doctrines to orgiastic antinomian cults. Despite the fact that Sufism did take several middle of the road, orthodox and quite sober forms, the massive injurious effects of its uncontrolled expressions on the body of the community can never be overestimated. How does one square, for example, the insistent Qur'ānic call for establishing an ethically just and viable social order on the earth with the popular Sufi practices which had no relation to the moral and material welfare of the Muslim community as a whole.

With the decline in intellectual creativity and the onset of ever-deepening conservatism, the curricula of education in the Madrasas (institutions of higher Islamic learning) shrank and intellectual and scientific disciplines expurgated, yielding the entire space to purely religious disciplines in the narrow sense of the word. Mechanical learning largely took the place of original thought. With the thirteenth century, the age of commentaries and super-commentaries begins and it is not rare to find an author who wrote a highly terse text in a certain field, in order to be memorized by students and, then, in order to explain the enigmatic text, himself authored

*See the Epilogue to the new edition of my book *Islam*, University of Chicago Press, 1979; the last chapter in *Islam: Past Influence and present Challenge* (ed. A. Welch & P. Cachia), Edinburgh, 1979 and my forthcoming *Islamic Education and Modernity*, University of Chicago Press (1981).

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both a commentary and a super-commentary! The human spirit cannot, of course, be completely killed - witness men like Naṣīr al-Dīn al Ṭūsī and Ibn Khaldūn - but whatever of this spirit survived was in spite of rather than due to the Madrasa system. It has been correctly said by Muḥammad Iqbāl that in the later Middle ages of Islam, the more original and creative minds moved from "orthodox" Islam into Sufism.

From the eighteenth century, with the advent of the Wahhābī and the Indian reformist phenomena, up to the last years of the nineteenth, a strong and agitated throb of life appeared in the greater part of the Muslim world. These reformers, for the most part, were convinced that the Muslim societies had degenerated because they had strayed from the original teaching of the Qur'ān and the example (Sunnah) of the holy Prophet and their proposed remedy was to return to these pristine sources of Islam. In the Qur'ān and the example of the Prophet, however, these reformers for the most part found little beyond the doctrine of the unity of God which they opposed to the cults of saints and their shrines. There can be little doubt that the doctrine of the unity of God is of the essence of the teaching of the Qur'ān and the Prophet's *sunna*, but as we have said at the outset, this monotheistic idea is organically leads to with the idea of socio-economic justice and a general ethical "reform of the earth." That these aspects were hardly seen by these reformers, except, by some like Shāh Walīy Allāh of Delhi (d. 1767) - who was distinguished among them by intellectual elevation and a very wide learning - is at least understandable since they were sharply reacting to the deluge of popular Sufi groups.

But while, in a limited way, these movements did represent a sign of new life in Islam, their effects in the all-important field of education mostly proved disastrous. If the traditionalist conservative had expelled philosophy and science from his Madrasa centuries earlier, the new fundamentalist reformist sought to exorcise all elements of intellectualism even from within the religious sciences themselves - including theology and whatever rationalist base the legal science had built for itself over the centuries. When one considers this fact along with the insistence of all of these movements on *Ijtihād* i.e. responsible original thought on the part of competent thinking individuals, the sutuation appears truly paradoxical: While insisting on *Ijtihād* these movements effectively destroyed the very intellectual instruments whereby *Ijtihād* could be done. The explanation of this paradox is that just as these movements had risen against Sufism, so they arose in revolt

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against almost all the medieval intellectual heritage of Islam, which they accused of having encouraged *Taqlīd* i.e. blind acceptance of authority as opposed to *Ijtihād* and of having obscured the original teaching of the Qur'ān. They, therefore, drastically simplified their educational programm, in the conviction that Islam, in its original form, was quite a simple religion which has been unnecessarily complicated and encumbered by medieval Muslim intellectuals. Now, in a sense, of course, this was quite correct: original Islam like any other religion was indeed simple, yet in a more important sense it was quite complex, in fact, more complex than perhaps any other religion, and the basic failure of the Wahhābis and other equivalent fundamentalist movements was not to see this fact. In such a simplistic atomosphere, what *Ijtihād* could possibly mean is difficult to see except that the purpose of *Ijtihād* should be that Muslims should be able to perceive how much they have deviated from the Qur'ānic monotheism - even though, as we have pointed out, the concept of monotheism rediscovered from the Qur'ān by these reformists was highly truncated, shorn as it was of its basic moral, social and economic implications. There is hardly a trace in the writings of Ibn 'Abd al Wahhāb, the founder of "Wahhābism", or any other middle Eastern fundamentalist reformer, of this basic original elan of the Qur'ān. Shāh Walīy Allāh is, of course, a different story but his followers fared little better. Let us now dwell for a moment on an explanation of what we mean by the complexity of Islam.

The Qur'ān and Muḥammad's activity had what might be called a "macro-background" in the conditions prevailing in pre-Islamic Arabia in general and in the Meccan milieu in particular, as we have pointed out at the very opening of this paper. The Qur'ān itself bears the most eloquent testimony to this when it speaks of Muḥammad's "burden which was breaking your back" (XCIV, 2-3). Besides this initial socio-historical background, the individual pronouncements of the Qur'ān on matters social, moral, political or economic, all have their specific backgrounds rooted in the flesh and blood of history, since the Qur'ān is hardly a purely speculative document except in some of its theologic-metaphysical statements. This background-material is largly preserved, in the Qur'ān-commentaries, and is called "occasions of Qur'ānic revelations." A study of this material is absolutely crucial for an adequate understanding of the Qur'ān both as a whole and in terms of its individual pronouncemnts. Indeed, what gives cohesion to the Qur'ān is just this social-historical background, which, of course, includes the activity of the holy Prophet

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himself. Fundamentally important though the fact of the background is, for that is precisely where the dynamics of Islam are displayed as a living force, it has been hardly made use of in classical Islamic legislation; the fundamentalists, who have an innate propulsion towards literalism are almost entirely innocent of it, and the modern Muslims of today totally ignore it because they are totally ignorant of it.

It is only by understanding the background of the Qur'ānic pronouncements, particularly in the social sector, that their true import can be a appreciated. And it is only by appreciating the full import of these pronouncements that their *raison d'etre* or their purposes can be really grasped and distinguished from the letter of the law. This all-important distinction was, indeed, made by classical Muslim jurists who called the letter of the law "rule or *ḥukm*" and its purpose "*ratio legis*" ('illat al-ḥukm)." This was theoretically the basis for their development of the principle of analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) for deduction of further laws from the Qur'ān. But this distinction was, first, urged in theory and was not often applied in practice, and where it was applied, it was sometimes applied much too widely but often much too narrowly.

This was not achieved by our classical jurists, at least not at all adequately. But the fundamentalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries deprived themselves even of this medieval legacy altogether - which, despite its grave shortcomings, was nevertheless both rich and deep- and, in their virulent anti-intellectualism, reduced Islam to the barest bones. From about the middle of the nineteenth century, arises the phenomenon of what is called "Islamic Modernism." In a definite sense, Islamic Modernism takes its point of departure from the earlier fundamentalism described just now. The fundamentalists had insisted on *Ijtihād* or new thinking but their real substantive accomplishment is not any new *Ijtihād* but the elimination or at least minimization of the popular superstitious religion and recovery of certain essential aspects, if not the whole, of original Islamic monotheism and insistence on a puritanical way of life. Its formal *Ijtihād* was just this insistence on *Ijtihād.* The Modernist now took over this legacy of the incumbency of *Ijtihād* and gave it a new content. This new content he took from the modern West. We need not go here into the details of the Modernist doctrines - they range from the role of reason in faith, through political democracy to the rights and education of women.

But it is not in the particular doctrines or reforms that the basic contribution of the Modernist uniquely lies, even though these are, of course,

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important in their own right, and with regard to several of them Modernist thought exhibits a considerable range of differences. The real revolution wrought by the Modernists lies rather in the fact that, in contradiction to the traditionalist conservative and the fundamentalist, he declared Islam to be not only a religion in the usual sense of the word - guiding private life and ordering rituals but covering the totality of individual and collective life. The Modernist who was in intimate touch with the West and, as we have said, was tangibly influenced by some of its modern institutions and doctrines, did not regard Islam and Christianity to be commensurate and comparable "religions" but rather regarded Christianity *plus* Western secular institutions-political, educational, economic, etc. - to be commensurate with Islam. He, therefore, talked about an Islamic polity, an Islamic law, an Islamic education, an Islamic society, etc. and not of secular polity, law, education etc, within the context of Islam. He showed with remarkable consistency that the Qur'ān had Islamically given the Muslim the principles of a democratic system which they failed to work out and, instead, yielded to autocratic rule; that the Qur'ān had Islamically given women rights which Muslims themselves not only failed to develop further but with regard to which they even gravely retrogressed; that the Qur'ān had Islamically and insistently called upon Muslims to use reason to study nature and to exploit it for man's good, but that most Muslims failed to follow-up the teaching. It was the Muslim Modernist, not the fundamentalist or the traditionalist, then, who recovered the integral Islamic legacy of the earliest days, and, having adopted certain key modern Western institutions and integrated them with Islam as being Islamic *par excellence*, offered Islam as a successful substitute for and the only viable alternative to the secular West as this Secularism began to show grave cracks in its moral and human structure.

The idea that Islam centrally aimed at the creation of an ethically based social order and that its very modes of worship, like prayer, fasting, *Zakāt* and pilgrimage had obvious and fundamental social and political dimensions and meaning was a truly revolutionary re-discovery of Islam. Some modern Western educated Muslims also went secular and sought to bifurcate life into a private sector called conscience which was the supposed home of religion and a public sector which they made over to secular activity - exactly as though religion, killed through Secularism, had to be effectively nailed into the coffin of conscience lest it turn into a dracula,

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while conscience was conceived of more as an effective grave for religion rather than as a furnace where moral life is baked and matured. But for the vast majority of modern educated Muslims, Islamic Modernism came as a great liberating force. Yet, Modernism has not as yet succeeded in the Muslim World, and for the time-being at least, appears to be submerged under a storm of what I call neo-Fundamentalism, so much so, that even its strength appear to be its weakness. Unless we can perceive the real nature of this engima, we will not be able to point to any solution for the future, let alone predict one.

The Modernist, on the whole, had argued for his reform - theses brilliantly and correctly. But the basic fault with his whole Modernist reform was that he proceeded selectively, the guiding principle for his choice of themes being the actual needs of the Muslim Community as he perceived them, or the points where he thought Islam needed a defence against Western attacks, for example, the principle of *Jihād*. He made little attempt to treat the Qur'ān as a whole and to formulate first its world-view, then systematize its ethics and finally derive particular doctrines and laws from it. The theses he chose for his reform were actually inspired by the modern Western milieu, which was in any case, bound to be the case. This gave the conservatives, the guardians of traditionalism, the occasion to suspect that the Modernist was actually advocating westernism because he had been brain-washed. Two highly sensitive points lent themselves particularly to re-invigorate this suspicion and extend it to the entire field of Modernist reform. The conservative, although he might agree that many a Muslim woman's rights which the Qur'ān gave her were denied to her either by her parents or her husband, was, nevertheless, dead against the emanicipation of women *after the Western model*. He thought this would eventually destroy the family institution which the Qur'ān regards as basic for society and he also pointed to what had begun to happen in the West with increasing poignancy: a wild crop of whole generations which, without any reliable sense of right and wrong, would not only menace their own societies, but before long, the world at large. Secondly, the conservative objected vehemently both to the Western attacks on the Islamic concept of *Jihād* and equally to the defence of *Jihād* offered by a number of prominent Muslim modernists. Islam was not spread by the sword as the West alleges, the conservative would say, but supposing it did, then while the sword at least apread Islam, what has the Western bomb spread? The reply that Western wars were not religious but for the sake, say, of economic markets,

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would of course carry no weight with the Muslim since for Islam, life in the economic market, the school or the political activity is as much subject to religious values as worship in the mosque.

This rejecting attitude of the conservative toward Modernism was even more fundamentally determined by his anti-Westernism. So far as borrowing of institutions from other cultures is concerned, the early generations of Muslims had done it to some extent. But these borrowings Islam had done on its own terms and in such a manner that it was able to assimilate these. What psychologically facilitated this was the fact that Muslims, being politically ascendant, were and considered themselves to be masters of their own destiny. But very different was the situation of Islam vis-a-vis the Modern West. Not only was Islam militarily, politically and economically defeated, the West was culturally and socially arrogant. Never before in the history of mankind, has any cultural system unashamedly claimed to be so unreservedly righteous as to pose as the ideal culutre for the entire human race and felt entitled to impose itself on all the others. While the conservative Muslim might recognize the technological and purely scientific achievements of the West as amazing and even admirable, the western society progressively seemed to him as a vast, exploitative and highly dangerous tribe of economic animals. One can well imagine the yawning gap between the two. The Muslim Modernist was caught in the middle. The conservative suffered from such a terrible psychological hiatus that the advocacy of even genuine and urgent reforms upset him. There appeared an equally yawning gap between the courageous and appreciative mentality of his early Muslim forefathers and his own unthinking negativism.

There were however, two very important pieces of legacy which fairly large segments of conservatives inherited from Modernism, thus giving rise to the contemporary phenomenon of neo-Fundamentalism which therefore, must be distinguished from the pre-Modernist Fundamentalism spoken of earlier. These two very important pieces of Modernist legacy are the desirability of the cultivation of Science and technology and the conviction that Islam does not exist only in the mosque and does not consist of certain modes of worship only, but encompasses the entire field of life. At the beginning of its career in the twenties and thirties of this century, this neo-Fundamentalism had the promise of a liberating and positive force. Although it was intemperate and often even denunciatory in its critique of

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Modernism, it was also highly critical of conservative traditionalism which it accused of having turned Islam into some kind of Brahmanism or Papal Christinaity. But not long after its birth, it began to show certain alarming symptoms. Its main motivation settled down as establishing Islam as something quite and indeed, utterly different from the West. Its representatives were not content with their determination to safeguard the integrity of the Muslim family life through raising moral standards - in fact, they have done precious little of this; nor have they been able to do anything to genuinely reform the system of education. Their Islamic needs seem to be satisfied by declaiming *ad nauseam* that whereas Western democracies believe in the Soverignty of the people, Islam believes in the Soverignty of God.

Two things must be borne in mind about neo-Fundamentalism. By and large, its banner-bearers are not trained scholars of Islam; in fact, a vast majority of them are not at all scholars of Islam in any sense of the word. They are essentially laymen with a strong emotional attachment to Islam and a strong desire to see it vindicated against the West. The neo-fundamentalist, unlike the pre-modernist Fundamentalist, is not a scholar, he does not think and argue about issues - he is not equipped to do that - but he mechanically declaims. To be sure, he can and does change his views but rather unpredictably. He is not embarrassed by blatant and frequent self-contradictions. And by denying himself the benefit of or recourse to his traditional heritage which, as we have said earlier, is highly rich in the variety of opinions it displays on almost any issue whatever, he has become extraordinarily narrow and inflexible. Indeed, his cliches and slogans have become almost devoid of any meaning. Since this situation cannot continue indefinitely, particularly when the Fundamentalist is in a position of power and decision-making, there seem to be only two possibilities: either he must change which is quite likely and in some cases, is happening now, in which case he may play around for a while with the medieval heritage and seek support therefrom whenever he possesses the scholarly access to it - or, sooner of later, he must evolve some form of neo-Modernism. If such development does not occur, then fundamentalism will be a very transitory phenomenon and will be replaced either by Modernism or some form of Secularism. Since Secularism does not seem to me to be a real possibility in Muslim societies, except as an extreme reaction to a stolid fundamentalism, some kind of neo-modernism seems to be the most likely possibility.

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